Exploring the value and role of creative practices in research co-production

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editorial

Exploring the value and role of creative practices in research co-production

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The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but seeing with new eyes.

~ Marcel Proust

Introduction and setting the scene

Over the past two years, COVID has illustrated how research benefit can be accelerated when need, resources and opportunity coincide. It has also demonstrated the challenges of implementing even relatively simple evidence-based interventions, such as mask wearing and vaccines. The global pandemic response has repeatedly shown that

evidence use is a complex social process determined by multiple financial, political, ethical, technological, ecological, temporal, and social factors – often in tension with each other. It has underlined the myriad influences on, and gaps between, evidence, knowledge, and action and reminds us of the need for diverse views to inform policy and practice.

Co-production is a method that can help weave social factors into the creation and shaping of policy and practice that is easily adopted. Its use has consequently proliferated, and the term has become ubiquitous within research and policy development. Despite this, questions remain regarding what constitutes co-production, what it involves and how to do it well (Green and Johns, 2019), particularly concerning the authenticity of its application and tokenistic use.

A previous special issue of this journal (Metz *et al*, 2019) explored this topic looking at 'Co-creative approaches to knowledge production'. The editors suggested '… a greater focus on the topic of creativity…' and its application in this space would add to the debate and develop it further. This special issue now picks up that thread by setting out to explore:

1. How is creativity applied within co-production?
2. How does such creativity influence the incorporation of evidence into policy or practice?
3. What impact(s) or effect(s) does creativity have in these applications?
4. What are the implications of this, and for whom?

Meanings and definitions

In this special issue we have resisted specific and/or limiting definitions of creative practice and co-production for the following reasons; a) language is a living, evolving thing, where meanings differ and shift according to time and context; b) this would be counterintuitive to the underpinning rationale and philosophy of creative practice and co-production; and c) the reality of creative practice and co-production is so broad, variable, and context-specific that rigid definitions have limited value and potentially exclude notable work. We acknowledge that this flexibility potentially leaves room for cynical misuse (disingenuously labelling activity as co-production). However, we recommend that greater clarity comes from others explaining their own interpretation or meaning behind the use of these terms.

> Greater transparency in their methodological descriptions about all partners, power, decision making, idea origination, practical action and activity in a process, will be more illuminating about the authenticity of such activity than the mere application of a label.

In the call for abstracts for this special issue, the guest editors related 'co-production' to a broad range of research, development and service improvement activities that include alternative umbrella terms of co-creation, co-design, co-research… (co-∗). The common feature is that they engage and involve diverse peoples who are impacted by a specific context, issue, scenario, circumstance, service, product, system, or organisation. These include people who are professionally

involved in it and/or public who use or 'benefit' from it. These people are not merely 'participants' who have information extracted from them and used by the researchers. They are active agents collaborating equitably in a team and embedded in the fabric of the project, with opportunities to engage in all decisions and activities. Indeed, the level and duration of involvement should be led by them, not by the academics/researchers.

As guest editors of this special issue, we defined creative practice as a way of being and doing; a marriage of divergent and convergent thinking and acting, where each half informs the other. The creative aspect concerns the use of artistic and/or novel ways of inquiring; thinking, seeing, exploring, reflecting, questioning, communicating, documenting, and recording. The practice aspect relates to intentional, routine, or even habitual actions performed as part of a person's daily life. The final crucial point is that the processes are as, if not more, important as the product. We would distinguish creative practice from 'everyday creativity' which can also be routine making, but in purpose, solely for relaxation and well-being as opposed to inquiry. In the context of this special issue, we argue that both the intentional processes of creative practices inquiry and the outcome or products of those creative practices are valuable. Bringing these ways of being, thinking and doing (and the outcomes) to co-production initiatives are the focus of the special issue.

As we expected, our authors interpreted co-production and creative practices quite broadly. Several authors framed their work around co-design and the UK Design Council's Double Diamond process (Design Council, 2021), incorporating intentional, creative activities as methods of sharing and synthesising knowledge (Grindell et al, 2022; Webber et al, 2022). Other examples included extending the co-design frame to encompass a long-term, structural component for partnerships working, knowledge mobilisation and system change (Micsinszki *et al*, 2021). An alternative co-design framing used Theory-U (Owens *et al*, 2022), and more generally using collaborative reflective practices (Spaa *et al*, 2022).

A few papers framed their notions of co-production and creative practices within the social justice work of Paulo Freire (Leonard and McLaren, 2002). Among these, some built on the traditions of participatory action research (MacGregor et al, 2022) and participatory arts-based methods (Phillips et al, 2022) or creative action research (Potts et al, 2022), while another drew on Freire's political activism by using Forum Theatre (one of three participatory drama methodologies known collectively as 'Theatre of the Oppressed') (Beckett et al, 2022).

Another contribution adopted a community of practice perspective and a broad social learning frame to co-production (Adelle et al, 2022). Finally, we include an article which draws on a kaupapa Māori (indigenous population of New Zealand) approach to co-production and knowledge sharing (Thom et al, 2022), which is rooted in deep cultural traditions of social gatherings, building and sustaining relationships, sharing of home and hospitality, community dialogue, storytelling and radical shifts in power.

This diversity illustrates some of the challenges of defining and reporting co-production and creative practice. The methodological diversity supports the use of co-production in contextually sensitive and relevant ways. However, this varied collection also reveals common strengths and universal themes. Individually and collectively, they shine a light on how to use creative practices and co-production to address high-risk, complex and stubborn social issues, and increase the use of

research evidence in contexts previously considered to be challenging in terms of adoption of evidence.

Summary of articles

From 52 original submissions from 16 different countries, and from a diverse range of disciplines and areas of focus, the final selection for this issue comprises nine research papers and two practice papers. For the interested reader, you can find out more about the review and selection process, and about the editorial team in the accompanying blog post (https://evidenceandpolicyblog.co.uk/).

Two of the research papers are cross-case evaluations; one develops a theoretical framework; four focus on policy co-production or co-design; while another focuses on co-producing a theory of change to inform the creation of a co-design programme.

Two articles focus on service or practice improvements within healthcare services, another on sexual abuse and exploitation in humanitarian crises. Two articles focus on incarceration and the relationship with mental health and substance use or re-integration back into communities. Others explore issues relating to food security and governance, back pain, Parkinson's disease, and post-injury psychological care.

Food features not just as a topic of research but also as a 'core ingredient' (excuse the pun) of community and relationship building, acknowledging the social dimension of knowledge creation, sharing and use.

In response to our first question (How is creativity applied within co-production?), the papers present a variety of contexts and forms of creative practice. Work in this special issue has been undertaken in Aotearoa (New Zealand), Canada, Denmark, Lebanon, South Africa, Uganda, the UK and the US. Creative practices include diverse approaches to storytelling (including digital and pūrākau [Māori storytelling]), forum theatre, drama and role play. Other approaches include drawing, collages, mood boards, visual metaphors, personas, ideation prompts and provocations, community mapping, body mapping, dance, music, creative writing, visualisations, brainstorming, prototyping and creative co-design, to name a few.

We start with a research paper (MacGregor et al, 2022) highlighting four key themes within arts-informed approaches. Themes which, alongside others, are illustrated in two articles, one research (Beckett et al, 2022) and one practice (Thom et al, 2022). A third research paper (Grindell et al, 2022) highlights key factors which enable creative co-design to support mobilisation of knowledge into practice in healthcare. This paper's themes are then backed up and expanded upon in the next research paper (Micsinszki et al, 2021) and a practice paper (Webber et al, 2022). This is followed by three research papers (Potts et al, 2022; Adelle et al, 2022; Owens et al, 2022) that illustrate a diversity of contexts, topics of application and approaches or creative methods used in co-production case studies.

The penultimate research paper (Spaa et al, 2022) takes a slightly different slant, picking up on the reflective qualities of creative practices used in design, suggesting that these are important qualities to bring into policy co-design. The final research paper (Phillips et al, 2022) presents a theoretical framework for analysis of arts-informed co-production methods.

Cross-cutting themes

In our synthesis of key ideas presented in the included papers, we discerned ten cross–cutting themes that go some way to addressing our second and third questions: 'How does creativity influence the incorporation of evidence into policy or practice?' and 'What impact(s) or effect(s) does creativity have in these applications?'. These ten themes were further grouped into factors which enable people: to contribute, make sense of a topic and help convert evidence into action (see Figure 1). We also picked out four golden threads, important themes that were perhaps not in every article or perhaps more implied. In what follows we present these ten key themes, followed by the four golden threads, as a starting point for discussion and reflection, rather than as fixed definitions or fully formed ideas. We hope, by presenting these, that they will serve as a provocation for others to explore, extend, challenge, test and refine.

Figure 1: Schematic illustrating the ten themes identified from our rapid analysis of all 11 articles in this special issue when looking for features relating to creative practices applied to co-production
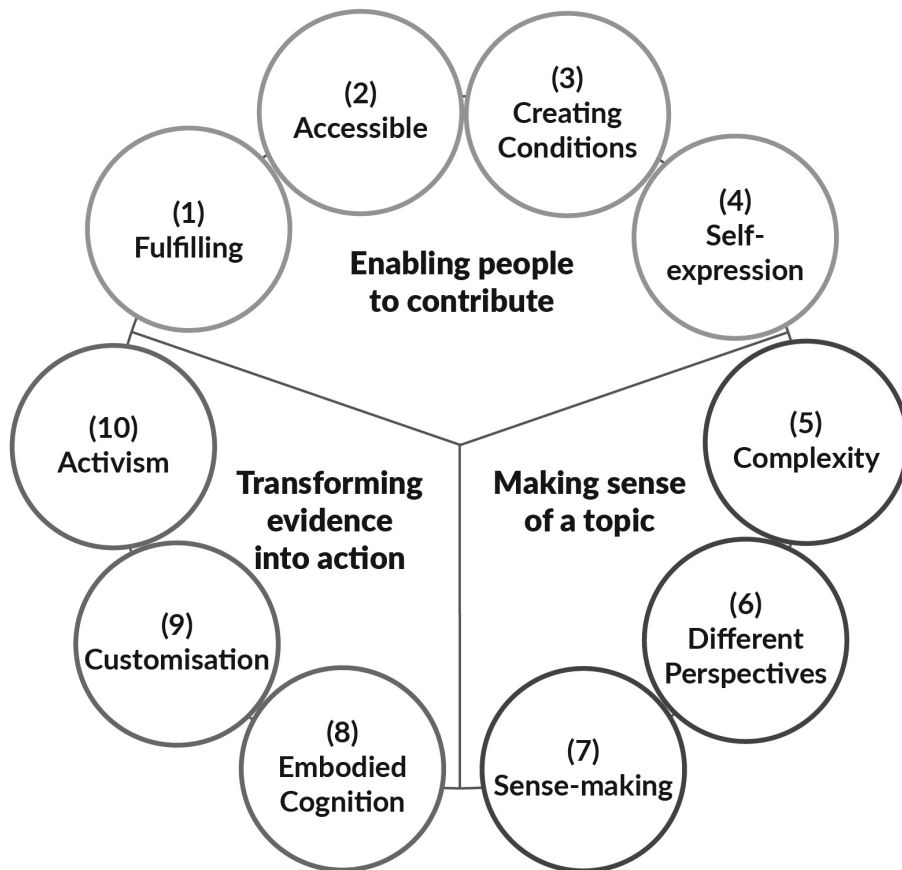
Enabling people to contribute

1. Fulfilling

Creative practices in shared settings enhance a person's sense of well-being, fulfilment, and accomplishment.

MacGregor et al outline a number of reasons why arts-based methods are fulfilling for co-production partners, from the joy of creating, the acquisition of new skills, the forging of connections with other partners through shared creative activities, through self-reflection and insight.

Webber et al and Beckett et al refer to the positive impact on co-design partners, identifying the empowering qualities of being able to use created products to negotiate differences and resolve conflicts. They outline the value of creative objects in building empathy, awareness, and sensitivity.

2. Accessibility

Creative practices are perceived as something anyone can have a go at.

Potts et al specifically point out the accessibility of creative methods when engaging co-production partners with low literacy levels, and additional advantages when data capturing in challenging circumstances, such as humanitarian settings. Many of the co-design articles in this issue refer to prototyping which, in a design context, inherently embodies permission to 'fail'. This refers to rapid cycles of 'fail often, learn fast', informal and sometimes spontaneous 'models' that explore how something may look, feel, function (or not). Calvo and Sclater (2021) refer to 'informal-mutual learning' as being a goal of community co-design, and the quality of 'playfulness' as one of four essential designer-ly conditions that help achieve this.

3. Creating conditions

Creative practices create and sustain informal, relaxed, and messy conditions, ideal for building relationships.

One of the main themes from Grindell et al is 'creating the right conditions' for co-production. This is echoed by Micsinszki et al who refer to safe and brave spaces. This is a vitally important distinction. 'Safety' in the context described here shouldn't be conflated with 'comfortable' or 'unchallenging' (Groth et al, 2020). The right conditions enable co-producers to bravely face tensions, negotiate conflict in a spirit of trust between partners, safe in the knowledge that there is no preferencing or hierarchy and that everyone's voice is valued equally. Trust and relationships are built from shared endeavour, shared vulnerability, shared acknowledgement of weaknesses, shared 'failures' in the form of unsuccessful prototypes. While governance, recording and documentation, and other such bureaucratic tasks are vitally important within co-production, care needs to be taken to ensure they don't impose too much formality, as this begins to erode the (arguably) far more important requirement of relationship building. Thom et al reveal the fundamental importance of relationships

and practical knowledge creation as a social enterprise in their account, further echoed by Beckett et al.

4. Self-expression

Creative practices support a variety of forms of self-expression enabling people to communicate complex ideas or experiences, tacit knowledge and other intangible information.

We can go back to the work of Henderson (1991) to see a fantastic articulation of the boundary-spanning value of drawings and illustrations, and the origins of these modes of sharing knowledge within the design and engineering disciplines. Yet this issue reveals much broader modes of creative expression, with examples in almost every paper from Beckett et al's use of Forum Theatre, creative writing or haikus used in Phillips et al or storytelling used by Thom et al and Adelle et al to projects that gave co-design partners freedom and variety in the choice of creative media, as in Webber et al. The authors of this editorial had a real sense of the liberation and freedom that came with methods of expression that moved away from the restrictive idiom of words alone, and a sense of the expansion of thought and learning for those expressing and those taking it in. There are examples of people using metaphors, movements, and symbols to explore functional and emotional aspects of experience, as well as envisioning new possibilities of what could be.

Making sense of a topic

5. Complexity

Creative practices enable a person or group of people to map out or 'see' complexity with nuance.

The mixture of methods (verbal, textual, performative, illustrative, and so on) is what is important here. The tangible and interactive representations of evidence, experience, ideas, systems, and interventions enable groups of people to externalise their own experiences, thoughts, and ideas. This allows them and others to interact with this data, to see connections and dynamic features, and gives them agency to change it. Through the design process, understanding of the complex problem iteratively evolved alongside prototype development (for example, Webber et al and Owens et al).

6. Different perspectives

Creative practices enable sharing and appreciation of different perspectives.

Groth *et al* (2020) stress the importance of being open to multiple perspectives. Several of the articles in this issue (Adelle et al; Owens et al; Becket et al) show how creative practices aid exploration of different perspectives and help build empathy for others' experience. They generate end products which are effective at expressing and sharing alternative realities and helping diverse contributors co-create new ones. These end products then serve as artefacts to explore how perspectives come together as a whole.

7. Sense-making

Creative practices support individual and collective sense-making.

Beckett et al, Grindell et al, Webber et al, and Thom et al all refer to the process of making sense of evidence through creative media. Perhaps importantly, but less explicitly in these articles, is the physicality of the sense making (see theme 8). This point overlaps with the earlier theme 3 about creating a safe and brave space, in which it is permissible to experiment with ideas. Spaa et al focus on the reflective qualities of creative design activities, that support deliberation both individually and (in co–design settings) collectively. Dialogue, reflection and deliberation were enabled through tangible forms (performative, artefacts or images).

Transforming evidence into action

8. Embodied and affective cognition

Creative practices enable people to think with embodied and affective cognition.

A vital part of successful training and professional practice is a dual focus on both didactic learning (for example, theory delivered through lectures or books) and practical learning (for example, active, embodied learning such as simulations, role play, work experience, and so on). Creative practices engage the whole body in forms of extended and affective cognition. As people perform, role play, or make images or artefacts to represent experiences, processes, systems or ideas, they inherently think with their whole body, all their senses and their emotions, perhaps more reflective of ways evidence would be employed in real–world behaviour and practice (Phillips et al; Beckett et al).

9. Customisation

Creative practices support the exploration and development of customisation.

Creative practices in co-production support people to explore solutions in multiple ways, rapidly representing variations on a theme. This provides the basis of interventions that are built on a common core, with adaptable elements, hence supporting wider adoption of interventions (Webber et al; Owens et al).

10. Activism

Creative practices are proactive and encourage activation and action.

Coming full circle and relating to theme 1, creative practices are fulfilling, in part, because a person sees progress. A 'thing' emerges and takes shape. Perhaps most significantly, when curated appropriately, people can quite literally see their knowledge contribution in the things (products, services and systems) that emerge. Visible progress and sense of ownership are key factors in catalysing motivation, creating a sense of achievement and ultimately empowerment. In Potts et al co–researchers in Uganda, people directly affected by violence, elected to call themselves 'community activists', activating themselves as leaders in violence prevention. Creative practices

have traditionally been closely related with activism and action in part because of this motivation and empowerment (Beckett et al; Webber et al; Owens et al). Indeed, the speed of implementation and the ongoing, sustained use of the work by Owens et al has been attributed to their co-design approach. The interested reader might like to explore Milbrandt (2010) who expands on the relationship between arts, social movements and transformation far more eloquently and richly, outlining six distinctive functions of the arts in transformation including empowerment and enacting goals.

Additional golden threads

Looking across the papers, in addition to the ten cross-cutting themes, we were struck by the importance of storytelling (in multiple forms), the importance of imagination in creating change, the ubiquity of power imbalances and one notable author.

A notable author

Every paper referenced Trish Greenhalgh, Professor of Primary Care Health Sciences, and sought to relate to, and build on her contribution to the field of co-production. We recommend reading her blog post 'Towards an institute for patient-led research' (Greenhalgh, 2019). While not specifically referencing creative methods, it strongly advocates for the forms of partnership working explored here.

Storytelling

Central to all the work included in this special issue, is the notion of storytelling, albeit in a variety of different (creative) ways, and its use through a diversity of methods and with a variety of outcomes. Perhaps the article in this collection that illustrates this most obviously is Adelle et al, showing how personal narratives can have a powerful influence in policy discussions by evoking a rational and emotional response, but also involve risk for the storyteller.

Imagination

While not making a specific connection with imagination, the guest editors inferred a connection between creative practices and imagination in several of the articles. The use of creative practices supported and enabled people to 'see' things differently; to see beyond the norms of their own personal social and physical experiences, and conceive new ways of working or doing. While creative practices do not have a monopoly on imagination, it does seem to play a catalysing or liberating function in envisioning new possibilities.

Power

The issue of power is woven throughout the papers and key themes, each of which acts (or intends to) as a mechanism to shift and rebalance power differentials between academics and non-academic stakeholders in collaborative research and innovation. The article that most clearly portrays this is Thom et al, in their practice article reporting their kaupapa Māori approach to co-production. Their disruption of

white privilege and of the 'standard' Eurocentric approach to research enabled (often) structurally marginalised voices (so often mis-labelled 'hard-to-reach') to be central in their process, and created a bridge between Māori and Pākehā (Western) 'spaces'.

Relevance to co-production

A primary issue at the heart of co-production is the challenge to the power of whose knowledge counts, how different forms of knowledge are accounted for, and by whom. We believe this collection of articles demonstrates the role and value that creative practices can play in supporting diverse people to engage in deliberation, co-production, and implementation of research into practice and policy. The marriage of diverse stakeholder perspectives, scientific evidence, and multiple other competing issues (ethical, financial, practical, ecological) with creative practices is fraught with tension and conflict, as illustrated by these articles. Yet creative practices give us the tools to navigate these issues and create a productive tension. Nick Sousanis (2015) sums this up wonderfully in his thesis, *Unflattening*. He points out that biological design takes advantage of the value of different perspectives. For humans, each eye sees a slightly different perspective. Our brains combine both perspectives to give us depth and texture. He points out that the tensions or contested spaces between different perspectives are valuable, but we need to reimagine the dialogue between perspectives to bring them together. The mode of dialogue shouldn't come from, or belong to, one specific perspective.

Phillips et al position co-production in the nexus of (productive) tensions between research and practice, science and arts, process and product, and legitimacy of different forms of knowledge. They bring theories of dialogue, power, knowledge, and discourse together with theories of embodied and affective knowing to propose that arts–based methods give us the tools to navigate these conflicts and are necessary to make them productive.

This special issue illustrates how creative practices function to support this 'discourse across the divides', and enacts collective deliberation and activism to move evidence to practice or policy and achieve new possibilities.

Future work

First, we acknowledge that more evidence is required to unpack both the value of, and mechanisms underpinning, creative practices in co-production. What we have outlined above and illustrated in the collection of articles in this special issue is merely a starting point.

This special issue highlights the need for further work that breaks down the evidence hierarchy which we would suggest has created a monoculture of evidence. Diversity of evidence (including different forms of knowledge) is vital to bridge the gap to policy or practice.

> Evidence derived from meta-analysis, seen by some as the top of the evidence hierarchy, is useless if it can't be adopted or taken up because of a systematic disinvestment in other forms of evidence and knowledge that are necessary to build up contextually nuanced understandings for implementation.

Beyond this, we recommend a focus on exploring the multiplicity of approaches; across the array of creative practices, to explore which work better in some contexts, with some people, or for some topics.

Finally, we make a recommendation for more interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary work (and funding to support such work); equitable collaboration between disciplines; and a willingness to put methodological narrow-mindedness aside in favour of diversity and plurality. Just as there is an epistemic injustice in doing research about people rather than with people, devaluing their experiential knowledge, so too is there an epistemic injustice in one discipline taking methods of another discipline, or indeed imposing the methods of one discipline on another, rather than collaborating with them. Working with people who bring that expertise, that alternative perspective, may be more challenging but, if done equitably and reflexively, will always be more rewarding.

A special issue edited by Greenhalgh and Papoutsi (2018) for *BMC Medicine* argues that *the study of* complexity in health services and systems requires new standards of research quality, namely rich theorising, generative learning and pragmatic adaption to changing contexts.

We would add that *the transformation of* complex services and systems requires the knowledge derived from such studies, combined with imagination. Without the combination of knowledge and imagination, we will be stuck in a loop of fiddling and tweaking systems.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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